

Bonnie Cashin:  
Designing the Foundation of Modern Fashion  
by George Sarofeen

Bonnie Cashin (1907-2000) was a mid-twentieth century American fashion institution. A free spirit flying outside the limitations of world of the Seventh Avenue, her practical approach to garment design spoke to, and answered, the needs required by the post-World War II woman's new fluid way of life. Though questioned greatly at first, the fashion world gradually accepted her point of view over a thirty years period and eventually copied her ideas extensively. Now, decades after her height of popularity, her design influence championing simple cuts, practical designs based on lifestyle, and mix and match sportswear still form the very foundation of contemporary Western fashion of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Having started her design career in the entertainment industry during the late 1920s, Bonnie left entertainment, crossing over into a life long and illustrious career as a fashion designer near the time a revolution in fashion occurred with the February 12, 1947 unveiling of Christian Dior's first spring collection. It was her belief, after seeing Parisian fashion, that American women wanted a more comfortable and relaxed wardrobe. Her subsequent designs led to a gradual reimagining of Western fashion. One might even say that she was the anti-Dior of American fashion.

Dior's *Corelle* collection was, unquestionably, a major turning point in fashion history, reestablishing and leading the direction of the haute couture industry in France. The look of post war European fashion was inspired by the desire to return a time of peaceful nostalgic beauty, long before two world wars tore Europe and most of the world apart. Dior, himself, was inspired by his memory of his mother and her contemporaries floating about in their Belle Époque fashions with skirts resembling flowers and the rustling of petticoats filling the air as they glided about the streets of Paris. Dior required women to corset and/or pad themselves to attain his idea of the desired feminine shape and silhouette. Indeed, these Parisian designs were beautiful, but based on functioning to serve a lifestyle and aesthetic found in a nostalgic past life. Yet, the world of the future would soon change quite rapidly and Cashin, always a practical person by nature, immediately sensed the impracticality of these fashions for independent and adventurous American women, like she.

At the same time, across the Atlantic Ocean, the United States found itself the victors, along with her allies, in this war. Like so many other countries, America sacrificed many brave men and women on the battlefield, however it escaped the physical ravages of the bombs, which fell upon Europe, Africa and Asia, destroying their industry and infrastructure. The American mood was one of ebullience. Industriousness, intuitiveness and positive thinking were the catalysts in America for looking forward to the future and envisioning a new and exciting world, leaving the past behind. In America anything was possible and the future offered endless possibilities for an ever better life and lifestyle. While Dior's fashion revolution quickly swept Paris, as well as the American establishment, a counter culture revolution was slowly occurring in America. This American revolution, unlike that of Mr. Dior's, cannot be pinned down to an exact date, for it grew slowly and surely during the same

period of time as American designers exerted themselves, reflecting the optimistic lifestyle adopted by the post war veterans and their families as they embraced the coming jet age. Like the slow methodical tortoise enduring the race with the faster and more flagrant hare, fashion designs based on the new realities of changing individual lifestyles eventually won. *Prêt-à-porter*, or high fashion ready-to-wear grew to become the new norm. As post war American women embraced sportswear, renowned fashion designer, Claire McCardell, lead the way in the creative designs of very relaxed, comfortable fashion. However, the standard bearer, and the most creative and fore-minded designer who truly popularized this American fashion revolution was Bonnie Cashin. Cashin's connection of lifestyle and mode of dress became the accepted basis for fashion design for the last thirty years of the twentieth century. After the end of World War II, and with the introduction of Cashin's first collection based on her desire to bring ease and comfort to clothing, the fashion world's awareness of this lifestyle connection grew and evolved so that by the end of the 1970s, Cashin was at the peak of her



popularity and lifestyle dressing had become the mainstay of the fashion industry. Bonnie Cashin brought her design insight of lifestyle connection long before it became recognized, considered or even accepted by the mainstream designers on Seventh Avenue. Her inherent sense of modern women, the way they wished to live and how to dress them for that life is perhaps her most significant contribution to the fashion industry and remains a guiding force. Her ideas and styles were simultaneously futuristic and timeless, thus becoming classics and all this began in her young life in California in the 1920's

Born in Oakland, California in 1907, Bonnie was the only child in a rather nomadic family. Her father, Carl, an inventor and photographer, liked to be on the move and took his

Figure 1 Bonnie Cashin wearing a dress of her own design, sewn by her mother Eunice, ca. 1927

family to several homes throughout California over the years before finally settling in Los Angeles. During the course of these moves one aspect of Bonnie's life was constant: sewing. This skill, which she learned from being a dressmaker apprentice to her mother, Eunice, along with her brilliant design talent would lead her on a journey through the design worlds of ballet, New York Theater, Hollywood motion pictures and, finally, high fashion.

Her journey began during high school, when having finished her junior year; she went on a practice run of job seeking armed with her sewing skills and her portfolio of design sketches. Her mother drove her to downtown Los Angeles where Bonnie presented her portfolio of sketches to the director of a local ballet troupe, who, upon reviewing her sketches, hired her on the spot and asked to start immediately. She was assured a retainer to secure her services as costume designer for the Fanchon and Marco Dance Troupe and went to work designing creations using her full scope of color and sense of movement with given choreography.

With all of the enjoyment that Bonnie had with this first job, she was delighted at the fact she was paid twenty –five dollars in cash for simply having fun at what she was doing. Upon graduation from school the following summer, she returned to work for the ballet troupe and her career began to take off as a result.

The productions by the ballet troupe caught the attention of the owner of the Roxy Theatre in New York City, who offered the troupe's manager, Jack Partington, a job managing his theatre back east. Mr. Partington, in turn, asked Bonnie to join his New York

staff as the costume designer. With some reluctance at moving from California, Bonnie followed the company to the Big Apple in 1932. Less than twenty years old, she traveled to the city she would come to consider her home.

“The youngest designer to ever hit Broadway.” read the story in *Variety* in 1933. The confidence that came with such headlines, greeting her arrival to New York’s theatre world, was seriously tested, for Bonnie was responsible for the design and production of three sets of costumes for twenty-four girls in the troupe, each and every week. Performing for audiences who came to watch movies by Fox studios. Bonnie was the first designer for famous Roxy chorus, known as *The Roxyettes*.



Figure 2 Bonnie Cashin, Design for Betty as “Russian Princess”, *Types*, ca. 1932

Looking back at those times, Bonnie commented, “I discovered very quickly how much I had to learn. And I’ll always think of my five years at the Roxy as my real formal schooling in design”<sup>1</sup>

Cashin believed that designing for *The Roxyettes* taught her four lessons. The first, to make quick decisions and to work rapidly and efficiently, the second, to develop a sense of resource within herself, third, she learned the effect of light on color and fourth, the simple fact that, as Cashin said, “Bodies Move...Our ‘attitudes’ today are moving ones. We’re always on the go, working or having fun.”<sup>2</sup>

Cashin continued to design *The Roxyettes* stage costumes, but soon became restless once she realized that she was no longer challenged with her job and desired to expand her

design horizons. Cashin expressed her restlessness from designing showgirl costumes for many years by designing a wardrobe of fashionable street clothes, which the ensemble wore within a fashion show number. Each dancer stepped from the pages of a giant facsimile of *Harper's Bazaar* magazine dressed in new, exquisite fashions and paraded about the stage, modeling them to the audience's delight. Fortunately for Bonnie, *Harper's Bazaar* editor, Carmel Snow, attended a performance and admired the young designer's costumes. Delighted by Bonnie's designs, she encouraged her to use her talents designing for the fashion industry and arranged for Cashin to become a designer at the prestigious house of Adler & Adler, which created suits and coats.

Bonnie started designing for Louis Adler's company on a part-time basis, as initially, she was unsure of entering into the world of Seventh Avenue's profit conscious, businesslike atmosphere which she saw as so very different from her familiar world of entertainment.

Cashin's first collection was met with instant success and she left *The Roxyettes*, making her formal debut into the world of wholesale apparel. Cashin worked at Adler & Adler as chief ready-to-wear designer from 1937 until 1943. Along the way she met with some harsh criticism from the buyers and salesmen in the showrooms. They complained that her designs were much too "too daring, too radical".

Everything I did seemed perfectly ordinary to me. For example, I had some jersey and some crepe dyed the same color, and combined them in a dress. It was the kind of thing I'd done hundreds of times with stage costumes. And of course today it doesn't sound surprising at all when combinations of dyed-to-match materials are commonplace. But then it was considered radical! Sounds silly doesn't it? I

also inserted a waistband into some of my dresses –another thing that seemed ordinary to me then and certainly seems ordinary to everyone now. I’d learned the value of a waistband when I was making costumes, of course: it wasn’t feasible to sew a very full tarlatan skirt, say, to a thin bodice, so of course we’d always use a waistband in between. But when I did the same thing with dresses, for the same logical reason, the salesmen told me it wouldn’t sell because it was too unusual!<sup>3</sup>

This juxtaposition between the utilitarian aspects of the latter and the glamorous showgirls' costumes with which Cashin had started out did much to define what became her signature style.

The public showed great enthusiasm for her creations, however, thanks to the growing recognition of sports clothes in the early 1940s. And though her name did not appear on the labels of her designs, her name was becoming well respected amongst the insiders on Seventh Avenue. Thanks to this respect of her peers, Bonnie answered New York Mayor LaGuardia’s call when in 1941 she, along with fashion designers, Claire McCardell and Vera Maxwell, formed a ‘top secret’ design team that contributed to the war effort during World War II by designing New York City’s civilian defense uniforms for women workers.



Figure 3 Bonnie Cashin, New York City Women’s Civil Defense Volunteer Organization Uniform, 1942

‘We were designing new uniforms and we had to make our samples with great secrecy. And it was interesting having an outside job to do when the whole industry was feeling cramped from the wartime restrictions on the amount of material and trim that could be used for any one garment.’<sup>4</sup>

During these years, Bonnie attended night school at the Art's Student's League to expand her horizons and hone her artistic skills. She met her future husband, Robert Sterner, in one of these classes and they married after a short engagement. Unfortunately the marriage was short-lived, as he passed away shortly thereafter. Though their time together was relatively brief, Robert taught Bonnie much of what she came to know about color and design, as well as an appreciation of art of all kinds.

Bonnie brought this experience into her design collections. In trying to be creative with the scarcity of fabric mandated at the time, Bonnie brought fashion and style into a new type of clothing – separates. She established that a woman could mix and match these separates and stretch her wardrobe.

With the loss of Robert, Bonnie felt that she wanted to return to California and be near her family and so resigned her position with Adler and Adler. Moving to Hollywood in 1943, Bonnie accepted a new challenge by returning to the world of entertainment and took a position as a film costume designer for Twentieth Century Fox.



Figure 4. Gene Tierney as “Laura” with Dana Andrews Design by Bonnie Cashin

Hollywood was like a breathe of fresh air for Bonnie. Studio designers were unhampered by The War Production Board L-85<sup>5</sup> wartime restrictions that dominated Seventh Avenue beginning in 1942. While she was living in California, Bonnie began t design clothing for herself that fit her new and active lifestyle. Her

mother assisted her and together they had a custom clothing business. The actresses that Bonnie was dressing for the movies were also coming to her for their off-screen outfits.<sup>6</sup> Her first film, *Laura*, released in 1944, won her critical acclaim for its fashionable contemporary wardrobe. In an era where designers tended to dress their stars in overly glamorous outfits, Cashin showed the world a glimpse of her more relaxed approach to woman's clothing by designing Gene Tierney a wardrobe that reflected the look which would be worn by any fashionable woman of the period for the situations in which the character, Laura, found herself. (Figure 3) Cashin was bold enough to dress Tierney in a totally unstructured outfit, a look that was quite unusual for the time and definitely far outside the mainstream fashion of the period. Many of the stars on the lot began to take notice of her clothes and asked Bonnie to design outfits for their personal wardrobes. While beginning to satisfy those requests, she was asked to design *Anna and the King of Siam*, a movie that allowed Bonnie to study and research clothing from the orient. The clothes of Far Eastern cultures always intrigued Bonnie. She felt the their elegant, simple beauty of their cut could be applied to Western fashion. Influences seen in such designs as show below for Linda Darnell as 'Tuptim' would become themes that Cashin would revisit many times in her career. Her appreciation of Far Eastern influences lead to her clean approach to design in mainstream fashion, when, after designing wardrobes for another 58 films, Cashin left her job so she might travel and see the world before returning to New York in 1948

Her travels took her to Paris where she saw what was happening in fashion on the street, thanks to the influence of Christian Dior and his contemporaries. Bonnie felt that the fashions were impractical and too restrictive for a modern woman on the go. After leaving Paris and while in the Orient, the practical aspect of layering in Chinese dress and of the

layering of Japanese kimonos was described to Cashin. In terms of the ever-changing weather, the kimono's versatility was especially appropriate for cooler temperatures or what the Japanese described as a "nine-layer day." She also studied the simplicity of cut and designs of Asian fashion and found that, to her, it was much better suited to what she saw as an answer for the lifestyle of the new American woman.



Figure 6 (l) Bonnie Cashin, Costume Design for Linda Darnell as "Tuptim" in *Anna and The King of Siam*, "[http://www.icollector.com/Linda-Darnell-Tuptim-pale-purple-top-designed-by-Bonnie-Cashin-from-Anna-and-the-King-of-Siam\\_i11436745](http://www.icollector.com/Linda-Darnell-Tuptim-pale-purple-top-designed-by-Bonnie-Cashin-from-Anna-and-the-King-of-Siam_i11436745)

Figure 7 (r) Bonnie Cashin, Silk chiffon bodice for "Tuptim" in *Anna and The King of Siam*"[http://www.icollector.com/Linda-Darnell-Tuptim-pale-purple-top-designed-by-Bonnie-Cashin-from-Anna-and-the-King-of-Siam\\_i11436745](http://www.icollector.com/Linda-Darnell-Tuptim-pale-purple-top-designed-by-Bonnie-Cashin-from-Anna-and-the-King-of-Siam_i11436745)

Bonnie returned to the United States with a much altered and more critical view of contemporary Western fashion. "You can't stuff a dress weighing twenty pounds into an overnight bag."<sup>7</sup> she quipped in response to seeing Parisian fashion. To her, Parisian designers were not responding to the realities of modern living a post war world. Design for this new world and the lifestyle of women within it became her calling. She had a great

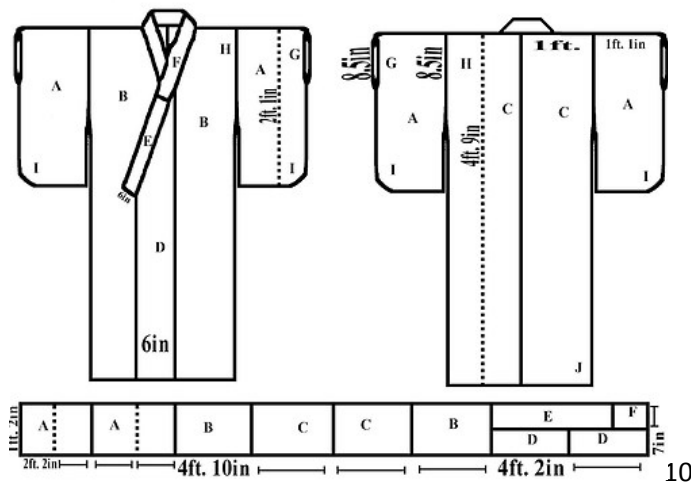


Figure 8 Kimono pattern

understanding of designing for the fast pace of life and travel she saw as the future, so in 1949 Cashin returned to Seventh Avenue to answer that call and begin to lay the very foundations of modern fashion.

Upon her return to New York in 1949, Cashin "introduced" the concept of layering garments into Western fashion. Of course, people around the world had been dressing in layers to accommodate the climate for centuries, but as an obituary in the *Economist* explained, "Fashion writers are ever grateful for something that looks new, and for a while layering was praised as the big new idea." Later in life Bonnie reflected upon this time.

The whole Eastern part of the world has always been of much inspiration to me. Aside from people watching, the art and the philosophies have had a strong influence. The "layered" concept of modern dressing in such vogue now has become a generic term in the fashion industry, and grew from my first studies and interest in China.

The cross-fertilization of ancient ideas with modern concepts has often stimulated whole new directions in my thought...Travels to all and every kind of community cannot help stimulating and inspiring. " 8

Motivated to create clothing for the American woman that reflected her own personal style. Using what she had observed in the Far East, Cashin totally reformed her thinking and used her ingenuity to adorn. She designed ponchos, mantles, capes and togas for her premiere 1949 collection applying her creative insight and knowledge of what she learned regarding traditional Japanese garments. Her utilitarian design concepts answered the need for to function in a practical way to the contemporary woman's daily life. and became the signature of her belief in the simple mobility of clothes.



Figure 9. Bonnie Cashin, 1947, Bonnie Cashin Foundation

Faced with many offers, Cashin decided to return Adler and Adler, where she dressed women using simple geometry and sumptuous fabrics. During this first year back in New York, she created a collection, which she called ‘We Live As We Please.’ Inspired by the Orient, but very much designing for a woman like herself, Cashin created uncluttered clothing without ‘pointless’ trims. Her collection consisted of layering lightweight garments in a mix and match manner. Buyers considered her to be a fashion maverick, for this was a totally new twist on the single coat over a dress look being shown by Paris designers were showing. ‘She’s very theatrical you know, designed for the movies.’<sup>9</sup>, quipped one of her critics. Amused by such comments, Cashin marched to her own drummer creating fashions from a new perspective. Her ‘We Live As We Please’ collection introduced a completely new casual look for the American woman and catapulted Cashin’s career upward resulting in great recognition. She emphasized function and comfort and insisted that a good design must also be functional design.

The following year she won both the Fashion Critics Award and the Neiman Marcus Award for her original contribution to the field of American fashion design for a prototype of her signature *Noh* coat, an unlined, sleeved or sleeveless T-shaped coat with deeply cut armholes to wear singly, in combination, or under a poncho or cape. Cashin was no longer an anonymous designer, yet despite her success, she sensed she would never achieve her creative best working under contract in the profit-oriented canyons of Seventh Avenue. She began

designing on a freelance basis in 1951, creating *Bonnie Cashin Designs, Inc.*, and worked out of her studio located across from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Unusual for the time, she worked on a royalty basis, creating complete coordinated wardrobes— accessories, knits, capes and coats, dresses, and separates—to be combined in layers to suit the climate or the event. By working with manufacturers, each with their own focus and strengths, Bonnie was able to produce high priced, and well as low cost versions of her clothing , hence broadening the reach of her influence, marketing to different economic levels of women. Almost anyone could afford a Bonnie Cashin creation.

Cashin's unusual ideas were welcomed and she typically worked years ahead of the market, pioneering clothing concepts which today seem part of fashion's essential vocabulary. In the 1950s when most women's clothing was concerned with structure, the Cashin silhouette was based on the rectangle or the square and called for a minimum of darting and seaming. Cashin showed layered dressing long before the concept became a universal option; she brought canvas boots and raincoats out of the show ring and into the street in 1952 and she introduced jumpsuits as early as 1956. . Her creations possessed an innate practicality that the modern American woman in a post war world needed, she felt. This practicality resulted in her flat-fold clothes (more practical for smaller apartment and home closets of the day), her layered clothes (because when one travels by air in the post war era, one usually has to put on or take off extra coverings), and her large carry bags (with room for all the things a women must carry in a small space).

*American Fabrics* magazine recognized her with the statement:

‘There are catalysts in every field and, to our minds, one of the most heartening

signs of the fashion times is the growing appreciation being accorded to our home-bred designers, ...Bonnie Cashin...has her own approach, her own flair...and intuitive understanding of the American woman and her way of life.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the 1950s, she presented original collections with innovative use of fabrics and styling. She presented her customers with sheath dresses and coats, but they were unique in their fabrics using organdy over linen or tweed over jersey. She covered her skirts with aprons that tied in layers to add uniqueness to the looks and to hide figure faults.<sup>11</sup> She teamed with Phillip Sills, a leather manufacturer, in 1953; to develop her unique leather piped sportswear that became one of her trademarks. The partnership of Bonnie Cashin and her original, practical designs and Sills craftsmanship had a tremendous impact on women's fashion and by the mid-1950s leather had become one of the top fashion materials. But Bonnie didn't just work with leather as her only inspiration, for as other designers were preoccupied with silk satins and taffetas, or wool gabardine suits, Bonnie experimented with canvas, tweed, denim and cotton, and mixed and matched wovens and knits, facilitating her mix and match approach.

In 1956, Bonnie traveled to India as an advisor to the Indian government on the export of hand-loomed textiles<sup>12</sup> and was inspired by the fabrics the people wore, the simplicity of their silhouettes and the ease of their layered dressing. She used this inspiration to expand her already growing sense of lifestyle dressing.

Bonnie looked at women and how they wanted to live, or how she felt they needed to live, and designed wardrobes for this way of life. She had the ability to understand how the American woman wanted to dress for her active life, showing collections that could be worn

year-round with clothing styles that were both glamorous and comfortable. Unique at this time in fashion history, she gave the design community a peek at what was yet to come in American Sportswear. She had her own unique design philosophy and would stay with that philosophy. While the rest of the design world looked to the aesthetic side of design, wanting to make women feel glamorous and sexy, Bonnie chose the functional aspect of design, allowing women to live their lives unconcerned about their wardrobes. Her designs eventually became known as ‘the Cashin look’—comfortable country and travel clothes in wool jersey, knits, tweeds canvas, and leather...in functional layers of clothing, coordinated with her own designs of hoods, bags, boots and belts.<sup>13</sup>

As the 1950s segued into the 1960s, American design was beginning to be recognized for its approach to casual, yet stylish dressing. Bonnie was recognized, along with Geoffrey Beene, as the two designers leading this approach.

Though their signatures were very different, Bonnie Cashin and Geoffrey Beene shared a common-sense, practical and innovative approach to design...In the 1960s she (Bonnie Cashin) continued to refine her designs for separates, usually in wool, cotton, and leather, which were worn with comfortable woolen sweaters with distinctive necks and hoods. Many of her concepts were ahead of her time; her streamlined hooded dresses and capes in particular would not come into their own until the 1970s.<sup>14</sup>

Bonnie Cashin’s collections of the early 1960s featured an early interest in op art, even before other designers picked up on this influence. The difference though was how it was interpreted into clothing. Bonnie used the influence in selecting bold



Figure 8. Bonnie Cashin, Sketch for Plaid Wool Poncho, 1968. Fashion Institute of Technology Library

plaids for her tweeds, flannels and knits. She used the influence in heavier garments in sportswear while other designers would later use it in silk for dresses. She turned toward new ethnic influences, long before others looked to them, taking her inspiration from peasant ponchos, along with American Indian hand woven blankets, as well as the use of suede for garments and trim.

Likewise, she absorbed the influence of the space age or futuristic look into her clothing and designed body

hugging, cowl neck and funnel sweaters made of fine gauge jersey knit that would pull up into a hood.

The Brooklyn Museum gave her a retrospective show in 1962 featuring 150 garments from her collections. A review of these garments allowed the industry to see “what was to come” in fashion. Her clothes featured leather pants, topped with ponchos, hooded tops and leather boots. She showed toggles closures, snaps, metallic twist fasteners, huge pockets and bold stitching.<sup>15</sup> In a statement about the retrospective exhibit, Robert Riley, the museum’s design consultant stated:

When the Fall collections of Balenciaga and Yves St. Laurent show hooded, poncho and booted sportswear very similar to Cashin’s of many years before, it is less indicative of her influence or the triumph of the “American Look” the most forceful circumstance that people are becoming increasingly interested in a casual outdoor

life. The success of these garments is a tribute to her realistic appraisal of an important facet of American life.<sup>16</sup>

In 1962, Cashin became the sole designer for Miles and Lillian Cahn's men's wallet and cigarette case company, Coach. She launched a new women's division for leather handbags and accessories. Her line was known as *Cashin Carry* bags featuring brightly colored leathers, large outside pockets for change and keys, and bright, fun patterned linings. Cashin wisely developed collections that complimented her Sills and Co. clothes. Seeing the practical use of the hardware and closures used in purses and handbags that she designed, she used such closures in her clothes when she was disappointed with the quality of buttons. 'Bonnie's clothes are original without being gimmicky or kookie. She designs her own hardware, notably the dog leash toggles and buckles that fasten many of her costumes.'<sup>17</sup>, read the *Sunday News*, in March 1966

In the mid-1960s, Cashin partnered with Ballantyne, a Scottish knitting company, producing funnel neck cashmere sweaters, based on op art and African themes. After several years, in 1968, she broke the connection with Ballantyne moving her knitwear production to Barrie in 1970<sup>18</sup>, and formed *The Knittery* to produce and distribute her own knitted fashions, using the talents of hand knitters in Scotland and upstate New York, near her country home, *Tantamount*.

Bonnie moved her studios in 1966, and, one floor above, made her home, at the U.N Plaza, across from the United Nations Building along the East River. Bonnie would remain at this location for the rest of her career.

The world began to follow Bonnie’s lead by the late 1960s. ‘Fashion Catches Up to Cashin’ reads a headline in *The New York Times* in 1968:

Bonnie Cashin cultists can rejoice. Their favorite, who has been doing her own thing for 15 years, suddenly finds herself in fashion’s mainstream. Leather, which she has been plugging away at since she joined Sill & Co., has become the fashion of the hour. Canvas and tweed, her enthusiasm, are not far behind. Her hardware fastenings, which she prefers



Figure 10. Bonnie Cashin, Noh Coat, wool knit with matching skirt, 1972, University of Cincinnati Historic Garment Collection

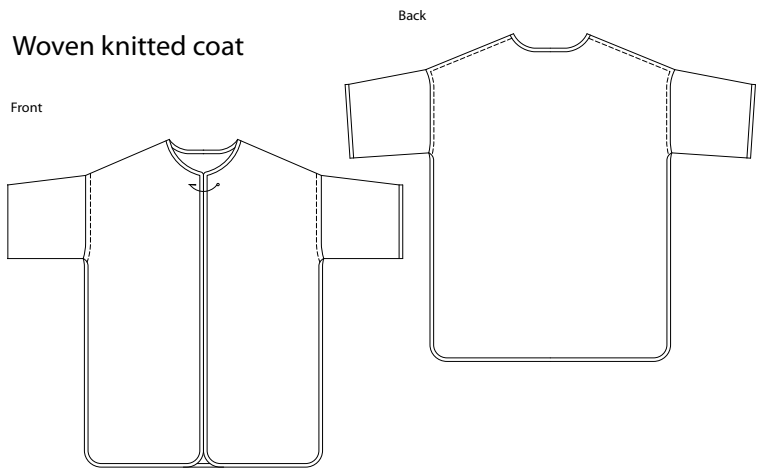


Figure 11 Flats for Noh Coat seen in Figure 10, University of Cincinnati Historic Garment Collection Archives

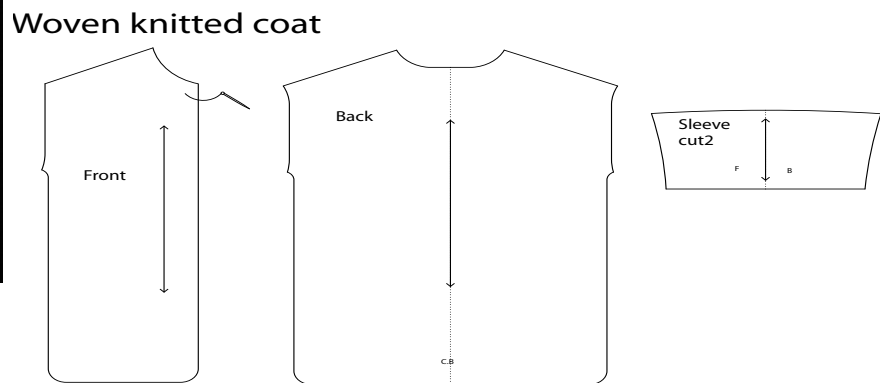


Figure 12 Pattern for Noh Coat seen in Figure 10, University of Cincinnati Historic Garment Collection Archives

most other designers' clothes, too, and her idea of piling clothes on in layers to adjust to the climate has become universal.<sup>19</sup>

The 1970s found the fashion industry crossing over from its former marketing orientation and no longer dictated fashion to consumers. Now they analyzed what the consumer needed and wanted and designed to fit the needs of their customers. The major couture houses like Giorgio Armani, Gianni Versace, and Valentino and the ready-to-wear knit house of Missoni all began to look for lifestyle for fashion inspiration, finally coming around to understand the design inspiration that Bonnie Cashin pioneered with her first sportswear collection in 1949. Entire collections would give the consumer a choice as to how she wanted to put looks together. Pants, skirts, sweaters, shirts and jackets could be selected and worn all from one designer or by putting different designer pieces together. Calvin Klein, Halston, Geoffrey Beene, Perry Ellis, Ralph Lauren and others opened diffusion lines to sell at prices affordable to everyone. Bonnie Cashin had the foresight and wisdom to explore and implement low cost versions of her fashion decades before them. 'Many of her fashions have been many years ahead of the times, as evidenced by introduction of knee-high boots in 1943, canvas raincoats in 1952, industrial zippers in 1955, jumpsuits in 1956, and fringed Indian-suede dresses in 1957, all which later gained wide vogue.'<sup>20</sup>



Figure 13 Bonnie Cashin. Orange Canvas Coat with Fur Lining with matching orange canvas skirt. Front view. University of Cincinnati Historic Garment Collection Archives

#27 (34, 1962)  
Canvas coat w/ fur lining

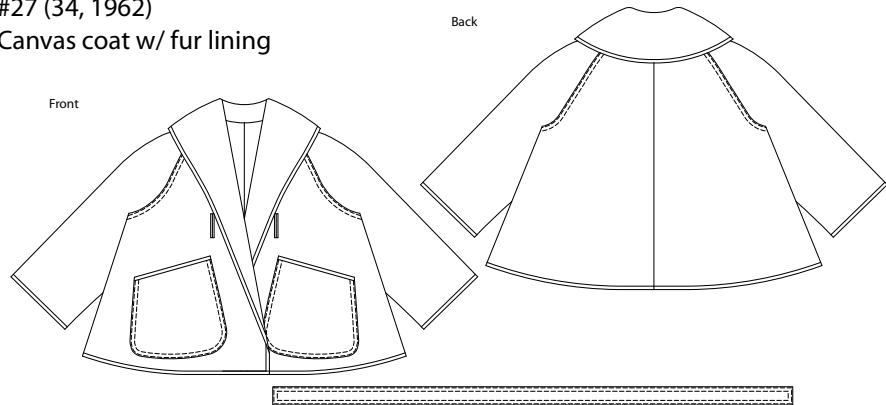


Figure 14. Flats for Orange Canvas Coat with Fur Lining seen in Figure 13, University of Cincinnati Historic Garment Archives

Canvas coat w/fur lining

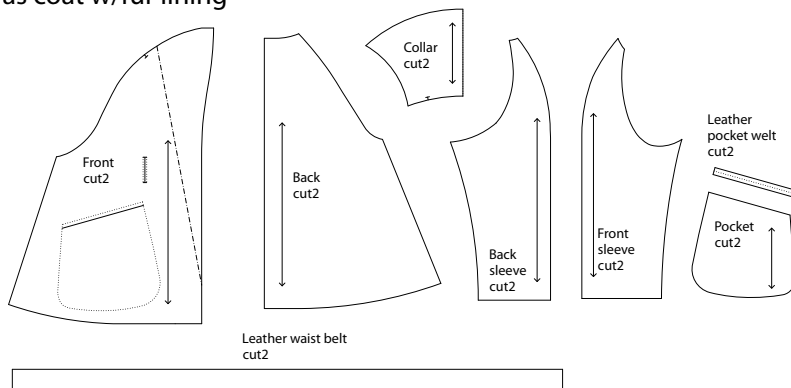


Figure 15. Pattern for Orange Canvas Coat with fur lining seen in Figure 13



Figure 16. Bonnie Cashin. Back view, Orange Canvas Coat with Fur Lining with matching orange canvas skirt. University of Cincinnati Historic Garment Collection Archives

Bonnie Cashin's collections, throughout the 1970s, included pants and pantsuits, but not in the traditional manner of other designers. Her pants were topped with toggle-closure vests; with wrap jackets or hooded jersey sweaters, all topped with vests or ponchos. Her jackets were unlined, yet finished so beautifully, with the inside looking as interesting as the outside. She

continued to show leather piping and patchwork, suede garments, and remained ever constant to her design philosophy, layering.

When inducted into the Fashion Critics Hall of Fame in 1972, Bonnie received the following accolade,

‘Bonnie Cashin is closer kin to the first desert wanderer to draw on a djellaba (hooded robe), or the first Indian to cut hide into clothing, than she is what’s generally called a fashion designer. The nomad and the Indian were first thinking first about climate, comfort and practicality; so, always, is she. Their cut and fabric evolved from their lives, their land, so do hers. It would be accurate to leave the adjectives alone and just call them Cashins. They are uniquely her own.’<sup>21</sup>

Bonnie Cashin left an immense signature on fashion, in general, and on American sportswear, specifically. While laying this foundation to our modern mode of dressing, she always remained true to her designs sense and let her customer lead her because, in fact, she was her own best customer. She led an active life, involved in the theatre, arts, travel, leisure activities, and perfecting her at fabric design and apparel development. She always followed



Historic Garment Collection Archive

#4. 1967

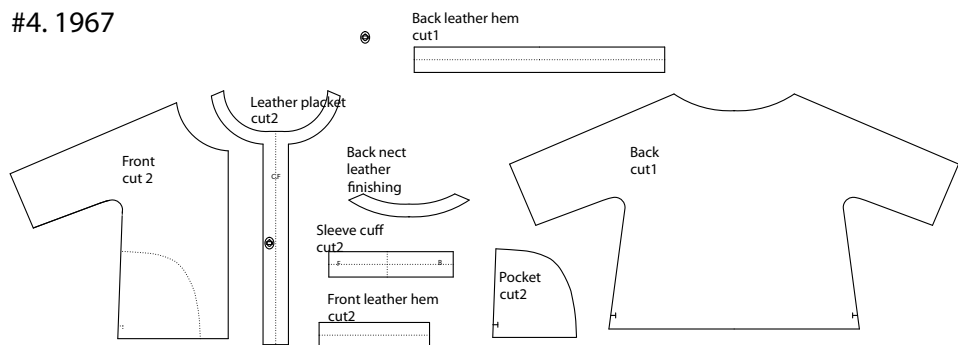
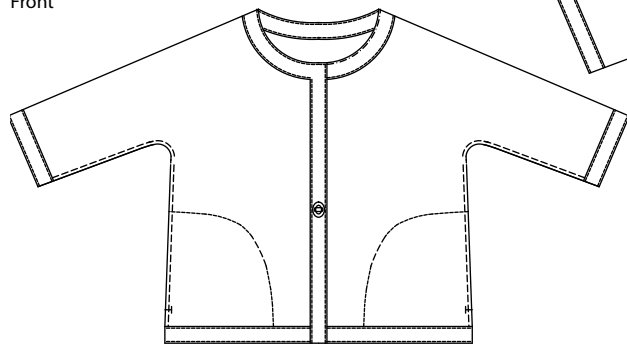


Figure 18 Pattern for Shell Pink Wool Knit Jacket, with Larger Pockets and Leather Trim, 1967, University of Cincinnati Historic Garment Collection Archive

#4. 1967

Front



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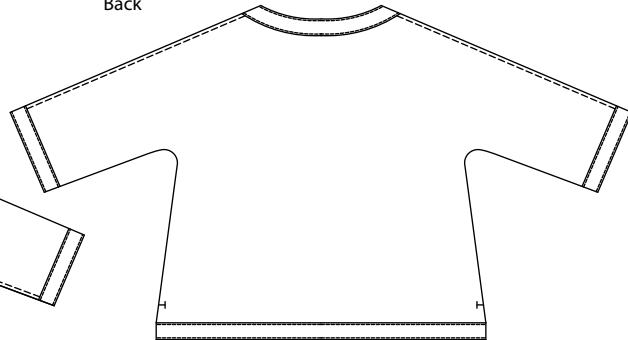


Figure 19 Flats for Shell Pink Wool Knit Jacket, with Larger Pockets and Leather Trim, 1967, University of Cincinnati Historic Garment Collection Archive

her design philosophy the form of clothing follows its function. . Her creations possessed an innate practicality she felt was needed by the modern American woman in a post war world. This practicality resulted in her flat-fold clothes, for more practical for smaller apartment and home closets of the day, her layered clothes, because when one travels by air in the post war era, one usually has to put on or take off extra coverings, and her large carry bags with room for all the things a women must carry in a small space.

By 1980, Bonnie began to remove herself from the workaday world of fashion so she might focus her efforts establishing the *Innovative Design Fund*, a not-for profit organization which funds design prototypes. In 1985, she retired, spending her time painting and donating her energies to her philanthropic projects until her death on February 2, 2000.



## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Young Faces of Fashion, Beryl Williams Epstein, Lippincott, Philadelphia, 1956, unpagged

<sup>2</sup> ibid

<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> ibid

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.blitzkriegbaby.de/stantonorders/june09.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Iverson, Stephanie Day, "My Passion for Cashin: A Young Student Remembers Her Fashion Mentor", *New York Times Magazine*, March 18 2001

<sup>7</sup> <http://unitproj.library.ucla.edu/special/cashin/leather.htm> accessed December 28, 2012

<sup>8</sup> The Creative Experience, Stanley Rosner and Lawrence Abt, Ph.D, Grossman Publishers, 1970, 247

<sup>9</sup> Fashion Genius of the World, Norman Bloomfield Beiber, Wass, Dickman, London, 1958

<sup>10</sup> Carlyle, Cora. "The American Designer is a Catalyst in the Fashion Field", *American Fabrics*, 1956, 26

<sup>11</sup> "Bonnie Cashin: Trail Blazer in Fashion", *American Fabrics*, 1956, 38

<sup>12</sup> Iverson, Stephanie Day, "My passion for Cashin: A Young Student Remembers Her Fashion Mentor", *New York times Magazine*, March 18, 2001

<sup>13</sup> Who's Who in American Fashion, Watkins, Josephine, Ellis, Fairchild, 1975, 50

<sup>14</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fashion, Mendes, Valerie and De La Haye, Amy. (New York) Thames and Hudson, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Reily, Robert "Bonnie Cashin Retrospective," *American Fabrics*, September 8, 1963, 60

<sup>16</sup> ibid, 101

<sup>17</sup> Thomas, Kay, "Bonnie's a Standout Amid Individualists", *Sunday News*, March 27, 1966

<sup>18</sup> Fashion Genius of the World, Sinclair, Serena, Bieber, Wass, Dickmann, 1979, unpagged

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<sup>19</sup> Morris, Bernadine, "Fashion Catches Up to Cashin", New York Times, May 3, 1968

<sup>20</sup> Current Biography. Charles, Ed Moritz, Hw Wilson, New York, June 1970, 71

<sup>21</sup> "Quotes from Various Awards", Bonnie Cashin Archives, unpagged